

Like many citizens, I have become increasingly concerned with the growing concentration of power within (and exercise of influence by) a few, large corporations. Not infrequently, as they have gained breadth as well as depth, these companies have become significant players in more than one industry, often very critical industries.

To be sure, there are economies of scale in almost any field of human endeavor. No reasonable person would propose making a small, rural farm cooperative responsible for putting a man on the moon, developing weapons defense systems, or maintaining the Internet's backbone. These are systems that, by definition, require considerable size. But we ought to be careful. There comes a point where size, power, and influence can become counterproductive and spawn serious downsides. The FCC's recent, widely-supported (although ultimately failed) attempt to exercise restraint within the broadcasting industry suggests that I am not alone in this view.

Yesterday, a significant portion of the Nation suffered a major electrical power blackout. Over and over we heard reports of how amazingly fast the Niagara-Mohawk power grid came tumbling down, with no way, apparently, to stop the cascade. The problem didn't stop with electrical service. There were significant ripple effects in telecommunications, industrial production, health care, and water supply. And it is, by no means, over. Many areas of the country are still suffering.

The problem is, not surprisingly, "under investigation." Whatever its cause and whoever is ultimately held responsible, we can be fairly certain that the problem (and its resolution) will be laid at the feet of the electrical power generation and distribution system -- that same group of large (and growing increasingly larger) companies who support the Broadband Over Power Line (or BPL) proposal.

What sense does it make sense to entrust to these same people (whose core competency is supposedly "keeping the lights on") responsibility for something as critical (and outside their core competency) as Internet telecommunications? I would hope that the FCC and its Staff give serious consideration to what is at stake as they deliberate and take action on the BPL proposal now before the Commission. I, for one, strenuously would oppose giving the power industry anything more to screw up.

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